



Ann Widdecombe
c/o NST City
Southampton Nuffield Theatres
142-144 Above Bar
SOUTHAMPTON
SO14 7DU

31st March 2019

Dear Ms Widdecombe

STATE PENSION AGE EQUALISATION FOR 1950s BORN WOMEN

Following your recent appearance on the BBC's "Inside Out South-West", we were delighted to hear you would be visiting Southampton today and would like to take this opportunity to respond to the comments you made on that programme concerning the impact of State Pension Age (SPA) equalisation on women born in the 1950s. We would naturally prefer to do this in person, but are putting our response to you in writing, should that not be possible.

As members of the Solent branch of the Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI) campaign - there are an estimated 3.8 million women nationally and overseas, with around 116,000 women and their families affected in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight - we were shocked to hear you describe us as ""unreasonable, self-indulgent and entitled" simply for wanting to be treated fairly during the SPA equalisation process. We agree the SPA for men and women should be the same, but object to the poor communication and implementation of the policy.

The opinions you expressed so forthrightly on the programme revealed a surprising lack of understanding about the lives of many women who were born in the 1950s. And although you used the collective "we've been caught by this", you have not been caught at all. You are not in our cohort and you received your SP at 60. Unlike many of us, you are also fortunate enough to have a good occupational pension.

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While we have spent our lives striving for equality, we have largely failed to reap the rewards of our own efforts. A discriminatory education system set the tone for our working lives. Very few of us went on to university and there were extremely limited career choices available to us. We were expected to marry and have children, which many of us did, often being overlooked for promotion as a result. Occupational pensions were not always open to us, so that now far more women than men are totally dependent on the SP for their retirement income.

Many of us left school and started work at 15. Juggling work/family commitments meant we were not glued to the television and radio on the off-chance there would be news about a change to a policy that was well-known and had been the same for decades. Put simply, we did all the right things. We worked hard, looked after our families and trusted we would have a small measure of financial security with our SP at age 60.

Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Department for Work and Pensions rightly expect to be notified of any changes in personal circumstances. We would expect the same courtesy in return when a major life-impacting policy change occurs, such as having an extra 5 years to wait for your SP. We would expect individual notification in timely fashion to allow alternative work and financial arrangements to be made. In the event, the first letters some of us received (which we take to be the 5 million you spoke of) were NOT about the 1995 Act. You failed to explain they were in fact about the later 2011 Act, which accelerated the equalisation timetable, raising the SPA for men and women to 66 and delaying our SPs even further. That letter, advising of a second SP 'hit', was for many of us the first we knew of ANY change. The letters were also sent to men, but the women who received them were mostly in their late 50s and fast approaching the age they expected to get their SP. Indeed, there are some women who have yet to receive any letter at all. Most of us cannot turn our lives around on a sixpence so the "5 million darn letters" were too darn little, too darn late. Evidence given to the Work and Pensions Committee clearly demonstrates that communication and media coverage were inadequate.

We are not the 'have it all' generation but have certainly been the 'do it all' one. We have contributed massively in unpaid work to our country, communities and economy. Today is Mothering Sunday and you have said being a mother is the most important job in the world. Those of us with children have had to balance doing the "most important job in the world" with the important job of contributing to the household income. Childcare as we know it now did not exist. Now we are older, we are still caring for others; looking after grandchildren so our children can go out to work and supporting elderly relatives. You would say we should do this out of love and, of course, we do. But the reality is that we cannot live on love and without our promised SP at 60, something has to give. What should that be? Should it be our families?

We realise your role on the programme was to be provocative. After all, that makes good television. However, we cannot let such a flawed characterisation of our generation of women as selfish and privileged go unchallenged. Nothing could be further from the truth.

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The lack of proper notice about the SPA changes has caused a shortfall of tens of thousands of pounds in expected retirement income. It has caused hardship for women who have never had equality in education, pay and pension opportunities. Indeed, we don't have equality even now. Some women have had to sell their homes to make ends meet. Some have to work in unsuitable physically demanding jobs, even in poor health. Others had divorce settlements based on getting a State Pension at 60. But all of us have suffered a grave injustice. A glance at the timetable for SPA equalisation shows how grossly unfair it has been. That is the crux of the matter for us. We do not ask for special treatment; we simply ask for fair treatment.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and we wish you a successful evening in Southampton.

Kind regards.

Yours sincerely



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